

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Women (UK) > Reproductive Rights (Britain) > **Northern Ireland's women won abortion rights but its politicians won't (...)**

# Northern Ireland's women won abortion rights but its politicians won't accept that

Tuesday 13 April 2021, by [MCKAY Susan](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2021).

**After Stormont voted to restrict abortion rights, Westminster is intervening to secure the services women are legally entitled to**

Northern Ireland is no country for young women. Out of 87 members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) at Stormont last week, just 12 [voted to allow women](#) the right to choose abortion in line with international human rights standards. These are built into a law smuggled into NI while the institutions in Belfast were collapsed in acrimony in 2019, following an inspiring collective effort by local feminists and the British Labour MP Stella Creasy. Jubilant, proud, relieved and tearful, women stood at Stormont with banners that said, simply, "[Decriminalised](#)".

But so far, Stormont has succeeded in thwarting the implementation of the new law, leading the NI Human Rights Commission to mount a legal challenge. On Thursday, the Northern Ireland secretary [Brandon Lewis intervened](#) and is expected next week to direct that the services to which women are legally entitled are actually made available. The Good Friday agreement promised equality – the continued stymying of abortion access is a depressing indicator of just how far we are from reaching it.

Feminists campaigned for decades to get the British government to deal with the fact that women in [Northern Ireland](#) were denied the same reproductive rights as women in the rest of the UK. Abortion was all but banned. Thousands of women crossed the Irish Sea for terminations in England. Ultimately, the UN found the UK government was in contravention of its obligations under international human rights laws and the supreme court obliged it to act. The law allows abortion in many circumstances, including after 24 weeks in cases where severe foetal impairment is diagnosed. The bill the DUP brought to its second stage at Stormont last week seeks to restrict this right except when the impairment is fatal.

The UN's committee for the elimination of discrimination against women (Cedaw) included in its [recommendations to the UK](#) "that abortion on the ground of severe foetal impairment be available to facilitate reproductive choice and autonomy". It also called for social and financial support for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term.

The DUP calls abortion one of its "red line" issues. Yet a [2020 poll](#) showed almost 60% of people believe abortion should be decriminalised, rising to 70% when it comes to fatal foetal abnormality cases. Westminster's interventions must be a matter of private relief to the party, but it will do all it can to signal to its more conservative voters (including a significant fire and brimstone element) that it continues to fight the good fight.

Progressives are used to being appalled by the DUP. The party also last week fought back against an [expert panel](#) calling for sexual orientation and gender equality to be included in relationships and

sex education (RSE) in schools, high profile figures have recently defended [conversion therapy](#), and the party is against same sex marriage, which also had to be brought in by Westminster. But there was bewilderment and anger among feminists over Sinn Féin's behaviour on the abortion bill. The party's 27 MLAs all abstained.

Sinn Féin's president, Mary Lou McDonald, [defended the decision](#). She said the DUP bill was a "stunt". One woman who found herself trapped with a devastating diagnosis and unable to get a late abortion several years ago told me the proposed bill felt like yet another punishment, and she was "beyond disappointed" that Sinn Féin had not "stood up and just said no".

The truth is that Sinn Féin could not do this – because it supports the DUP's position. It does not "trust women" as feminism requires. There is a smiling [photograph](#) of Mary Lou McDonald and the North's deputy first minister Michelle O'Neill in 2018 on the day when the referendum to lift the abortion ban in the Republic was won: they're holding a banner that says, "The North is Next!" While it is now broadly pro-choice, Sinn Féin shares the DUP's position that some abortion rights must be legally restricted. It does not support the UN's recommendation on severe foetal impairment. Voting with the DUP would have been honest but impossibly embarrassing to it, so abstention was the only option.

McDonald said her party wants "the same legislative framework and regime" to apply to the whole of Ireland. The Republic's legislation on the late abortion issue is actually in line with the DUP and Sinn Féin's. It does not work for women, because the distinction between severe and fatal impairment is in practice often impossible to make. Some severe abnormalities are not even detectable until 20 weeks, and women, their families and their doctors should not be forced to make an inevitably painful decision while also facing complex legal hurdles. But [Sinn Féin](#) will not risk alienating entirely those among its core voters who are as conservative as the DUP.

Stormont's health minister, Robin Swann of the Ulster Unionist party, has refused to commission the services except in very limited circumstances, claiming public consultation and executive agreement are required – to implement a British law. The DUP has vowed to fight the British over this. Throughout the pandemic, women have continued to have to cross the Irish Sea to get abortions in England. As Green party leader Clare Bailey noted, this is hypocrisy. The DUP's "frenzied" opposition to the Irish Sea border installed in the Brexit trade deal was, she pointed out, supposedly about the alleged diminishment of Britishness yet when it came to women's rights, the party insisted we remain in "a place apart".

Both Sinn Féin and the DUP know that the law has to comply with the UN's recommendations. This could end up in the courts again, causing more delay, more torture for women in heartbreaking situations. Brave women laid their souls bare through court case after court case to get these rights. Just 12 of Northern Ireland's politicians are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with them.

---

**Susan McKay** is an Irish writer and journalist

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

---

**P.S.**

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/20/northern-ireland-women-abortion-rights-stormont-westminster>